

# ISSUE PAPERS

## 2010 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES 2009

# Education

## Changes to the Comprehensive Master Plan Process to Be Proposed

**As one of the key components of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002, the use of strategic planning by local school systems has been found to be instrumental in the success of Maryland schools. The General Assembly approved legislation in 2007 that ensures continuation of the process beyond the Bridge to Excellence implementation period, but effective July 1, 2009, a provision allowing local school systems to submit preexisting comprehensive master plans for the new fall 2010 submissions was repealed. A workgroup reviewing the master plan process has proposed changes that could be enacted in 2010.**

### Masters Plans Bring Accountability to the Bridge to Excellence Act

The development of a comprehensive master plan by each local school system was one of the major accountability components of the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002. The Act required significant enhancements to State funding for public elementary and secondary education and gave local school systems broad discretion to use the added revenues for programs, initiatives, and enhancements that would best serve local student populations. The master plans were designed to ensure that the large infusion of funds would be used on focused sets of identified strategies.

MGT of America, Inc. (MGT) submitted an interim report on the evaluation of the Bridge to Excellence program in December 2007 and the final report in December 2008. The evaluation specifically identified strategic planning as the most crucial factor in improving student performance. Local school systems were initially required to develop five-year plans and were required to update the plans annually during implementation of the Bridge to Excellence Act. Chapter 652 of 2007 then added two additional years of mandatory plan updates (fall 2008 and 2009). In addition, the legislation required school systems to develop new five-year master plans by fall 2010 and required annual updates to those plans that would likewise cover five years.

To allow the legislature to review the final report from the Bridge to Excellence evaluators before proceeding with the mandates for 2010 and beyond, Chapter 652 included a provision that required the General Assembly to revisit these decisions in 2009 to determine whether:

- the comprehensive master plan requirement for local school systems could be differentiated to reflect differing levels of progress in improving student achievement; and

- local school systems could use preexisting comprehensive plans to satisfy the master plan requirement.

The General Assembly let the July 1, 2009 expiration date on the authorization to use preexisting comprehensive master plans take effect but gave itself additional time before the fall 2010 submission to continue studying the issue. With no additional action this session, all school systems will be required to submit new five-year comprehensive master plans by October 15, 2010.

### **Legislative Changes to the Master Plan Process May Be Proposed**

A workgroup established by Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and including representatives from local school systems has developed recommendations for the master plan process. MSDE is drafting the legislation that would be needed to implement the recommendations. Major recommendations include delaying by two years (to fall 2012) the requirement that local school systems develop new five-year master plans and reestablishing a provision to allow a local school system to submit a preexisting master plan if the State Superintendent of Schools determines that the system's existing plan meets all of the requirements. The requirement for updates to the existing master plans would also be extended by two years.

The delay is proposed out of concern that the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the national standards movement may change federal education requirements. Differentiating the master plan process is proposed as a way to reduce the administrative burden of developing all new master plans and to reward those systems that have been successful under existing plans.

### **Planned Use of Federal Stimulus Funds to Be Included in the 2009 Update**

A significant amount of the aid from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is aimed at education. Maryland is using its share of the education stabilization funds (roughly \$721 million) to support existing education aid formulas. Local school systems are also receiving \$413.8 million in additional Title I of ESEA special education and technology funds. In return for the enhanced federal funding, local school systems are responsible for documenting their planned and actual uses of the funds. To meet this requirement, and to address legislative concerns that local school systems budget one-time ARRA funds with awareness that funding will no longer be available after fiscal 2011, local school systems will be required by MSDE to include this information in the master plan annual updates.

## **Study Brings MSDE Changes to Master Plan Processes**

The MGT evaluation of the Bridge to Excellence program found that local school systems that had used strategic planning processes prior to Bridge to Excellence demonstrated better student performance than those that had not. Furthermore, based on interviews with master planning teams and school district leaders, MGT's interim report concluded that, in a majority of local school systems, the master planning process has enhanced the involvement of and collaboration by key stakeholders, increased strategic planning and use of data for instructional decision making, and helped align expenditures with the systems' goals and strategies.

Participants in the MGT study also identified numerous ways in which the master planning process could be improved. A common observation among respondents was that the process was overly burdensome and redundant and detracted from school system efforts to improve classroom instruction and student achievement. Recommendations for reducing the bureaucratic burden included standardizing formats for submission of data, eliminating redundant data requests, and allowing for electronic submissions of master plans and updates. Participants also noted that the timeline for submission of master plan updates was not aligned with budget processes or the reporting of results from State assessments, meaning the updates were not providing timely performance or financial data. Finally, more than half of assistant superintendents and almost one-third of superintendents suggested that master plan reporting requirements should be differentiated by various factors, including district size, performance, and Bridge to Excellence per-pupil funding levels. One master plan team suggested that updates be provided on a biannual basis.

In response to these concerns, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) instituted mandatory electronic filing of master plan updates using standardized templates. Data fields that contained information already in MSDE databases were pre-populated to save school systems time. Each system is still required to provide 10 hard copies of its master plan, including 1 signed by the superintendent and the board of education president. Also, the elimination of constructed responses on the high school assessments has shortened the time necessary to score the exams, so results are typically available in time for inclusion in the updates submitted by October 15 each year.